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Democratization "From the Middle Out": Soviet Trade Unions and Perestroika

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Most Western observers have viewed Gorbachev's campaign for "democratization" with skepticism. They think that he is not serious and democratization means simply the mobilization of Soviet society, not its empowerment, or that the few, real changes he has effected are limited to the intelligentsia — people can't eat *glasnost*, after all. Alternatively, if for some reason he really is committed to opening up the political process and allowing greater competition, then he is certain to fail in the face of fierce opposition from the Party and state bureaucracy whose power and privileges such reform would threaten.

Apart from the possibility that genuine enthusiasm for political reform, including *glasnost*, may run much wider and deeper than is commonly thought, the skeptical view of democratization suffers from a tendency to look at things too much "from the top down." It makes little allowance for innovative responses by the institutions and organizations that make up the state and society, by focusing almost entirely on the threatening aspects of change rather than on the opportunities created. It also assumes too much about — and places too much weight upon — the power and purpose of those at the top, by ignoring what goes on at the grass-roots level in the course of reform and by failing to allow for the ways in which events may alter the calculations and priorities of those at the top and elsewhere.

This essay is a case study of the Soviet trade unions' response to *perestroika*. Its main purpose, however, is to examine the process of democratization "from the middle out" — from the vantage point of an established institution in the middle of the system, whose relations with top leaders, with other organizations such as the Party, and with society as a

whole constitute the arenas in which real democratization must proceed or fail. The unions may seem a curious object of study in this regard. By reputation one of the most conservative of the Soviet Union's "public" (non-state) organizations, they are still regarded by many as the prototypical "transmission belt" of the totalitarian state. The U.S. State Department, partly at the urging of the AFL-CIO, will have nothing formally to do with Soviet unionists and routinely denies them visas to the U.S., claiming — with some though not total justice — that Soviet unions are agents of the Communist Party, not the Soviet working class. In politics the trade unions are not a first-rank player. They remained practically inert during the first two years of Gorbachev's rule, and they have pursued a generally slow, conservative path to reform for most of the period since. Only very recently has trade union performance become the subject of serious debate.

On the other hand, it is hard to imagine real democratization that does not involve the unions (or some other institution representing workers), and evidence suggests that significant trade union reforms are finally being considered. Indeed, a truly radical reform that would transform the unions into a much more powerful, independent, and stubborn defender of workers' economic rights and interests, although not the most likely outcome, is no longer the fantasy it seemed just two or three years ago. But whatever the end result may be, the trade unions' behavior to date and the way in which they recently have become an issue illustrate the dynamic, *process-like* quality of political reform more generally and suggest that the prospects for enduring liberalization in the Soviet Union are probably better than a view solely "from the top down" would lead us to believe.¹

¹ This essay is based partly on a series of conversations held in Moscow in June 1988. Those interviewed include: S.I. Shkurko, head of the VTsSPS' Scientific Center; M.P. Mudrov, chief editor of the VTsSPS journal, *Sovietskiye profsoyuzy*; Ye. N. Osinkin, head of the trade union committee at Moscow's Likhachev Auto Plant (ZIL); M.V. Baglay and O.V. Smirnov of the Shvernik Higher School of the VTsSPS; V.I. Kadulin, editor for public and state institutions of the CPSU journal, *Kommunist*; I.O. Snigireva, of the All-Union Scientific Research Institute of Soviet Legislation; and R.Z. Livshits, of the Academy of Sciences' Institute of State and Law. Financial support for this trip was supplied by the Yale University Center for International and Area Studies. Research assistance and helpful advice were provided by Brian Carter and Joel Hellman.



A Slow Start

For the first two years of the Gorbachev era, Soviet trade unions were nearly invisible. In documents and the occasional published article or interview by a top union leader, one could detect cautious reservations about some of the new General Secretary's principal social policy themes, and in private, most non-union labor policy specialists in Moscow acknowledged the unions' conservatism on these and a range of other issues. Yet, it was the inactivity of the unions — and the inattention to the unions from the outside — that was most striking.

One probable cause of this was the remarkable continuity of membership in the leading organs of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (VTsSPS) which sits at the top of the union bureaucracy. When the 27th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) met in February 1986, a year after Gorbachev took office, three-fourths of the VTsSPS Secretariat elected at the 17th Trade Union Congress four years earlier (March 1982) were still in their posts and present as delegates; five VTsSPS Secretaries had between them nearly 70 years' tenure on the job. But before the year was out, a series of retirements, transfers, and promotions had effected the most thorough congress-to-congress transformation of the leadership in over 25 years. Although Stepan Shalayev remains VTsSPS chairman — one of a small and rapidly dwindling number of high-level Brezhnev appointees — the 18th Trade Union Congress in early 1987 reelected only one of the other eleven members of the VTsSPS Secretariat named at the 1982 Congress, and only seven of the other 25 members of the 1982 Presidium.

Turnover in the leadership served as one harbinger of change; another came in an almost offhand criticism by the General Secretary at Krasnodar in September 1986. Although Gorbachev had on several prior occasions upbraided the unions for a variety of failings, his comments this time were unusually sharp. In his first major speech on the need for "democratization" (as distinct from the expansion and perfection of socialist democracy), Gorbachev characterized the unions as "toothless" and suggested that while Party leaders hovered too closely around enterprise managers, trade union leaders "walk around under [their] thumb [and] dance the Krakowiak with them at a time when a firm word should be said in the interests of the collective."² The remarks stung and prompted a quick admission by the VTsSPS that change was indeed overdue.

At the January 1987 CPSU Central Committee plenum, *perestroika* entered a new stage. Radical reform of enterprise management was approved in principle, and political reform was placed on the agenda and given equal priority with economic reform. Gorbachev's revolutionary proposals for democratizing the Communist Party and political system did not win the Central Committee's endorsement at that time, but did initiate the 18-month process of debate and consensus-building which culminated in the dramatic events of the 19th Party Conference in June 1988. Meanwhile, the radicalization

of Gorbachev's reform program made continued inaction by the unions probably impossible, and most Soviet observers writing today attribute the changes now underway within the unions to the decisions of the 18th Trade Union Congress which convened in February 1987.

Yet it would be wrong to conclude that Gorbachev's pressure caused a change in union leaders' attitudes. The 18th Trade Union Congress seemed a rather inauspicious event at the time, and Shalayev's opening day report was especially disappointing in its nearly palpable aversion to reform.³ The VTsSPS chairman expressed no real support for radical economic change and practically ignored the draft enterprise statute which had already become the subject of a burgeoning and heated public debate. Although he declared that the unions needed to "learn to work in conditions of a deepening of democracy, the development of self-management, [and] the growing political and laboring activeness of the people," his accent was on adapting to the democratization of society, not on democratizing the unions. At a time when reformers were touting the benefits of democratization, Shalayev seemed more concerned with the pitfalls, at one point warning that "some individuals and even groups of working people try to use for their own purposes measures [taken to] democratize management, to place their own personal and group interests higher than the interests of the collective and society as a whole. The unions must unmask such displays as social demagoguery which are incompatible with genuinely collectivist morality and the principles of socialist self-management."

Gorbachev, who spoke the second day of the Congress, also was disappointing, although for a different reason. While he delivered a spirited defense of democratization generally, the General Secretary was vague when it came to analyzing the unions' present situation or to suggesting specific proposals for change, and he seemed almost to apologize for the harshness of his comments at Krasnodar.⁴ His criticisms this time, although more extensive and detailed, were moderate in tone and nothing at all like the severe public indictment to be served up a year later by the press.

Thus, even in early 1987, after the CPSU plenum, one could sense a distinct lack of enthusiasm for *perestroika* on the part of VTsSPS leaders and an unwillingness on the part of Gorbachev to push the unions very hard. Nevertheless, the rapidly changing political environment in the country at large encouraged other speakers at the Congress, especially local activists and a number of recently-appointed mid-level officials, to vent much more pointed criticisms of the lagging pace of restructuring and of the inactivity of the VTsSPS in particular. In the end, the Congress resolved, albeit in very general language, to join the process of restructuring and to address the problems that delegates had complained of the most: over-bureaucratization, a bloated apparatus, and the extreme lack of independence of union officials and activists at the grass

2 M.S. Gorbachev, *Izbrannyye rechi i stat'i* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1987), Vol. 4, p. 100.

3 *Trud*, February 25, 1987, pp. 2-6.

4 Gorbachev, *op. cit.*, Vol. 4, pp. 424-443.

roots. Within a month, the VTsSPS issued the first in a series of decrees which began to turn these decisions into practice.

Bureaucratic Reform, Populist Rhetoric

Although modest, the reforms instituted since the Congress have been neither cosmetic nor trivial in their effects. With important qualifications, enterprise union committees (*profkomy*) can now set their own spending priorities, and *profkomy* large enough to have a paid staff no longer are limited by centrally-set regulations on size and structure.⁵ In principle, these *profkomy* also are permitted to pay 50 percent wage supplements to "highly skilled" staffers, financed out of money saved through personnel cuts, although the chairman of the *profkom* at ZIL, the huge Moscow auto plant, complains that he is as yet unable to realize this right because the necessary regulations have not been issued by the VTsSPS.

While some measures have aimed at broadening local organs' rights, others have aimed at reducing the bureaucracy and its capacity to stifle local initiative. Statistical and financial reporting requirements have been slashed — nearly in half, one VTsSPS leader has claimed — and numerous legislative and regulatory acts alleged to be inconsistent with the new enterprise law have been repealed.⁶ Meanwhile, the bureaucracy has been trimmed, and more cuts are coming. In a recent interview, Shalayev said he hopes eventually to reduce the size of the apparatus, from the provincial level on up, by as much as 30 percent, which would mean the elimination of more than 10,000 authorized positions.⁷ These reductions are to be part of a major structural reform currently being prepared, the main result of which, Shalayev predicts, will be the elimination of a substantial portion of the branch trade unions' city, district, and province committees.

In addition to the rules changes and staff cuts, VTsSPS leaders claim significant progress in the advance of intra-union democratization. During the 1987 report-and-election meetings held in the smallest union primary organs (those with less than 150 members), up to a third of the chairmen of *profkomy*, shop committees, and *profkom* bureaus were reportedly elected "directly from among several candidates."⁸ While this figure is almost certainly an exaggerated view of what really happened, a large number of press items suggest that there has been a certain opening up of the electoral process, with increased competition and more meaningful voting both at the grass roots and at higher levels.⁹ Indeed, the VTsSPS Presidium was supposedly told in June 1988 that high-level vacancies in the branch trade union central committees are now routinely filled *via* contested elections.¹⁰ Although VTsSPS leaders have not been noticeably supportive of intra-

union democratization in public, the union press has reported favorably on competitive elections, including those for managerial posts, and there may be a certain amount of "learning" taking place as time passes. The chairman of the Kemerovo province trade union council (*sovprof*) recently recalled his initial skepticism regarding contested elections, and how actual experience changed his mind, leading him to doubt whether "we [had] really been right to resist for so long aspirations that have matured."¹¹

Invigoration of the unions has not been limited to questions of internal governance, but also has been expressed in the growing visibility of trade union leaders in a wide range of policy debates. At the same time, the quasi-populist positions VTsSPS leaders have generally taken in these debates seem in many cases to be inconsistent with the deregulative and pro-market tendencies of radical economic reform. On housing, the only issue the VTsSPS has consistently voiced a strong interest in since Gorbachev came to power, the unions have pushed hard for increased building, while ignoring and perhaps subtly opposing increases in rent. On wages, although the VTsSPS has not openly opposed the campaign to increase differentiation, it has resisted the effort by supporting the more conservative, "regulation-intensive" variants of reform. Regarding the new enterprise law, some union leaders have urged ministries to maintain highly differentiated enterprise norms governing the retention of profits, which would in effect preserve the involuntary subsidies often given to poor performers by more successful (or wealthier) firms, while others have criticized the newly-formed enterprise councils for choosing production plans less taut than those prescribed by central planners. On the other hand, the VTsSPS recently staked out a truly revolutionary position with respect to resource allocation generally, when Shalayev argued in his speech to the Party Conference that the share of national income devoted to consumption should be raised from approximately 74 percent at present "to a minimum 78-80 percent" — and implied that the needed funds could be taken from defense.¹²

The most striking example of populism counterposed to deregulation has been the VTsSPS' increasingly undisguised opposition to consumer price reform — either elimination of the sizable subsidies now given to many basic goods and services or a significant move toward market-pricing, both of which would result in large price increases. Economic analyses doubting the need for price increases have appeared in the union press, while union leaders have argued that price inflation *already* is a serious problem needing redress. Meanwhile, in conjunction with the State Price Committee, the VTsSPS has led a sustained effort to publicize instances of price indiscipline in the consumer goods sector, in what seems very much like an effort to mobilize popular support for

5 *Sovetskiye profsoyuzy*, 1987, No. 12, p. 22; and 1988, No. 1, p. 26.

6 "To Overcome Inertia," an interview with VTsSPS secretary Vitaliy Provotorov, *Sotsialisticheskaya industriya*, June 23, 1988, p. 2.

7 "Closer to Life, to the Interests of Man," *Trud*, June 23, 1988, pp. 1-2.

8 "To Overcome Inertia," *op. cit.*

9 E.g., *Sovetskiye profsoyuzy*, 1987, No. 21, pp. 28-29; No. 23, p. 18; No. 24, pp. 21, 22; 1988, No. 2, pp. 4-5; and No. 8, p. 26.

10 Interview. Also, N. Grineva, "Two Candidates," *Trud*, March 2, 1988, p. 2.

11 V. Romanov, "Demand of Oneself," *Trud*, February 28, 1988, p. 2.

12 *Pravda*, July 3, 1988, p. 2.

the retention of controls.¹³ The unions have complained especially often about the gradual “erosion (*vymyvaniye*)” of the supply of relatively cheap goods and services, a consequence of looser planning rules that have allowed enterprises to shift resources into higher-priced, hence more profitable, lines of business. Union leaders stress how much this hurts the living standards of the poor and those on fixed incomes and have suggested — in letters from Shalayev to Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov — that the list of centrally-issued state orders (*goszakazy*) be extended to include the production of such goods as girls’ dresses (11 rubles or less) and summer sandals (7 rubles), an approach *Pravda* has denounced as ridiculous.¹⁴

In sum, the unions have so far pursued a relatively conservative, “bureaucratic” approach to internal reform, with primary emphasis on rules changes, staff cuts, and structural reorganization. While committed to increasing the independence of local organs, the VTsSPS has shown no interest in sponsoring a major redistribution of power between top and bottom. Within the unions, *glasnost*’ is increasing and some liberalization of electoral practice has occurred, but it is difficult to relate either to the full-fledged support of top union leaders. Nor is it possible to credit the unions with much support for *perestroika* in national policy making. Although union leaders acknowledge the slowness of union restructuring, they stubbornly defend themselves nonetheless. At times this has become ludicrous, as when VTsSPS Secretary Vitaliy Provotorov tried to blame a faulty information policy — a failure to get the story out! — for the widespread impression of union paralysis.¹⁵ More often, they blame the passivity of rank-and-filers. Until very recently, then, one had the sense that the VTsSPS was more interested in streamlining the organization and mobilizing activists than in trying to alter the basic orientation of the trade unions by changing their structural position in the larger political economy.

The Unions Become an Issue

In the six months before the June Party Conference, the trade unions became a political issue for the first time since Gorbachev took power. One manifestation of this was an upsurge in public criticism, which VTsSPS leaders apparently perceived as threatening, and which in tone and substance sometimes rivaled the unions’ severest Western critics. The assault was led by two articles in *Pravda*. The first, which appeared at the end of March, reported the case of a Moscow construction firm where management of one division lowered its workers’ skill ratings by a grade, as a means of implementing the higher tariff rates prescribed by the September 1986 wage reform. Although aggregate earnings did not fall, most workers were outraged. Yet local union organizers did nothing to oppose management’s decision.¹⁶

The speed with which top union leaders reacted suggests that they thought this was more than a criticism of the failings of one *profkom*. Ten days later, *Trud* reported that the presidium of the construction workers’ union had disciplined several of the officials responsible. But this was evidently felt to be an insufficient response, and so the VTsSPS Presidium itself reviewed the question and handed out more reprimands, including one for the branch union chairman.¹⁷

On the very day *Trud* published the VTsSPS resolution on the first *Pravda* article, however, a second article appeared — this time, a real broadside.¹⁸ In language that grew progressively more pejorative, the unions were faulted at almost every possible level. The “new realities” of radical economic reform had revealed “in merciless fashion *profkoms*’ helplessness, deafness, in essence even their lack of rights in many concrete situations.” The “deficit of social justice” revealed by *glasnost*’ had come about not only with the unions’ acquiescence, but with their “co-participation.” Some *profkoms* used their control over housing queues and the like as a “powerful means of suppressing criticism in defense of their appeasement [with management].” Others sanctioned forced overtime, which suggested to the author that Lenin’s famous aphorism describing the unions as ideally “a school of management, a school of economizing, a school of communism” no longer applied: “It’s as if it were a completely different ‘school,’ one of indifference and bureaucratism.” The author quoted a letter-writer from Karaganda, who complained about an ostentatious office-building local union leaders had built for themselves and who observed: “The trade unions have grown into a huge bureaucratic apparatus which long ago became cut off from rank-and-file workers. With our dues we continue to finance the salaries of its functionaries. Our trade union movement has degenerated.”

This was only a single newspaper article, yet its location and the unqualified nature of the attack mark it as special. Moreover, the indictment was a fair summary of a broad range of critical observations and supporting data that the media have been reporting in recent months. For example, there seems to be wide agreement that local union organs perform their defensive functions poorly, that few workers expect much of their unions in this respect, and that most tend to avoid the unions when they have grievances. In a poll of workers at four Moscow enterprises conducted by the VTsSPS’ Scientific Center, only six percent of the respondents said they turned to union organs when they encountered some form of “injustice.” Nearly half said they went to their foreman instead.¹⁹ On the other hand, rank-and-file members tend overwhelmingly to view their unions as primarily the distributors of “goods (*blaga*).” The same survey reported that by far the largest percentage of inquiries received by the *profkomy* at these factories (29.5 percent) involved such problems as housing, childcare, vouchers for tourist travel and the like — five

13 E.g. V. Golovachev and A. Tarasenko, “Goods and Prices,” *Trud*, April 17, 1988, p. 2.

14 D. Valovoy, “State Order,” *Pravda*, May 30, 1988, p. 2.

15 “Concerns of the Trade Unions,” *Kommunist*, 1988, No. 8, pp. 10-18 (at 16).

16 V. Lyubitskiy, “Why They Were Silent,” *Pravda*, March 30, 1988, p. 2.

17 *Trud*, April 9, 1988, p. 2; and June 1, 1988, p. 1.

18 V. Lyubitskiy, “Whose Interests The Trade Union Defends,” *Pravda*, June 1, 1988, p. 3.

19 “Concerns of the Trade Unions,” *op. cit.*, p. 10.

times the number of questions having to do with wages and the setting of output norms.

The relatively petty, administrative matters that preoccupy union officials at the factory, their lack of power (or even relevance) vis-à-vis workers' legal and job concerns, the sheer amount of work sometimes required, and the low pay (or lack of pay in most cases) have evidently made union positions increasingly unattractive. In 1987, the union semi-monthly, *Sovetskiye profsoyuzy*, ran a series of articles on the low prestige of union work, particularly for "non-released" officials, and on the difficulties involved in recruiting candidates and retaining them for longer than a term (i.e., one punch on the ticket of an ambitious "social activist").²⁰ The survey of Moscow enterprises cited in the previous paragraph, in addition to polling workers, also asked union officials and activists how they felt about the possibility of (re)election to union office. Only a seventh of the respondents said they would feel "enthusiasm" or "great enthusiasm," half said they would feel "no great enthusiasm," and a quarter "decisively rejected the prospect." Finally, if grass roots union officials tend to have a low regard for their work, many ordinary citizens seem to have an equally low regard for union officials. A recent *Moscow News* poll of Muscovites found trade union officials ranked second from the bottom on a list of ten occupations, ordered according to the degree to which respondents thought their incumbents deserving of special privileges. While the country's top leaders received an average 4.3 rating (5 = deserving of all privileges, 2 = deserving of none), and well-known artists and writers an average 3.6, trade union leaders were given 2.7. Only Youth League (*Komsomol*) officials ranked lower.²¹

The Debate

Viktor Mishin, former Komsomol head and now a VTsSPS secretary, complained recently that despite the vigorous debate over political reform that had developed with the approach of the Party Conference, the trade unions remained largely ignored. "There is practically no serious thought being given to the present activity of the trade unions," he said, "nor is there an active discussion of [their] place and role in society, even in trade union publications, let alone in the central theoretical and popular ones."²² To a degree, the charge was fair; until 1988, published interest in the unions was indeed slight. Nor was this much of a puzzle. Union leaders were in no hurry to begin a debate about their future, and though pressures from activists below were becoming more insistent, top leaders had no difficulty in containing them. The number of outside specialists working on the unions is tiny. As for Gorbachev, except for his speech at the trade union congress, his remarks on the unions have been infrequent and almost always brief. Nevertheless, with respect to that particular moment and including the discussions taking place behind-the-scenes, Mishin was wrong. In the last year, a serious discussion has developed, ranging from the functions

trade unions should perform to the absolutely fundamental question of trade union autonomy.

Historically, the Soviet debate about trade union reform has been defined by Lenin's famous political "compromise" of 1921, which prescribed that Soviet trade unions should be "dual-functioning" — responsible both for production and for the defense of workers' rights and interests as expressed in official plans and laws. Although Lenin refused to rank one function ahead of the other, his successors decided otherwise. With forced-pace industrialization and Stalin's demand that the unions "turn their face to production," the unions' production responsibilities grew and their defensive role withered. In the 1930s and during World War II, the trade unions became the prototypical "transmission belt" from the Party to the masses, whose primary purpose was to extract from workers the maximum in energy, initiative, and discipline. While there were exceptions, particularly at the grass roots, union organs at all levels tended to slight their defensive obligations, except when these posed no conflict with the state's production interests. After the war, a cautious effort was begun to reinvigorate the unions, and this movement flourished in the second half of the 1950s under Khrushchev. Reforms were instituted at this time which not only strengthened the unions' formal "defensive" rights, but which also widened their role in the oversight of labor law and health and safety regulations, and in the management of various welfare programs. Soviet scholars argue about the relative impact of these changes. Most agree, however, that the effects were not lasting and that performance of the unions' defensive functions once again lapsed under Brezhnev.

Gorbachev has so far shown no inclination to redefine the basic issues, and in this respect he clearly is a moderate, not a radical. At most, one can interpret his statements as urging the unions to restore balance in the fulfillment of their dual functions or, possibly, to give their defensive obligations top priority. He told the trade union congress that he imagined the unions to be a "sort of counter-weight to technocratic impulses in the economy which, one must say, have diffused rather widely in recent years." By this he appeared to mean that union organs at all levels should be more aggressive in opposing managers and policymakers who would sacrifice workers' social and welfare interests to those of growth and efficiency. Yet, Gorbachev has refused to repudiate dualism itself. In September 1985, at a meeting in honor of the 50th anniversary of the Stakhanovite movement, he called a concern for workers' social, cultural, and material interests the trade unions' "holy of holies," but added that such issues cannot be resolved "outside systematic and persistent struggle for the highest productivity of labor, and for discipline and organization at production.... The defense of working people's interests through a rise in productivity is one of the most important duties of the trade unions, and of all production collectives."²³ Near the end of his speech to the trade union congress, Gorbachev quoted Lenin on the importance of making sure that each trade union member is interested in production and aware that only by increasing output and productivity "will Soviet

20 *Sovetskiye profsoyuzy*, 1987, No. 7, pp. 13-15; No. 11, p. 1; No. 16, pp. 6-7; No. 18, pp. 6-7; and No. 23, pp. 1 & 7.

21 "Social Justice and Privileges: How The Notions Compare," *Moskovskiy novosti*, 1988, No. 27, pp. 10-11.

22 "Uprising through Practice," *Trud*, April 9, 1988, pp. 1-2 (at 1).

23 Gorbachev, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 428.

Russia be in a position to triumph.' That's the way Lenin posed the question in 1920, and that's the way we pose it today."

But others pose the issues differently. At one level, a growing number of specialists have argued for the rejection of dualism and exemption of the unions from all production responsibilities. A favorite target of this group are socialist competitions, probably the unions' single most important activity in terms of the time and energy expended on them. Critics observe pointedly that in some socialist countries, management organizes such competitions, while the unions make sure the pace of work does not become excessive.²⁴ At another level, there are those who believe that *any* form of co-responsibility with the state is corrupting. According to Roman Livshits, a nationally-renowned labor-law specialist in the Academy of Sciences, the trade unions should perform *only* defensive functions, which would mean giving up not only responsibility for production but their welfare role as well. To make his point, Livshits suggests it was their long-time role in co-managing the social insurance system that led the unions to propose not paying workers compensation initially following a temporary disability sustained off the job — any "manager of state funds" would have done the same.²⁵

Many unionists agree that local activists are seriously overburdened, and some are ambivalent about retaining any role in promoting production. As one union journalist said in an interview: "The unions are responsible for everything and [therefore] for nothing. For plan fulfillment, technological modernization... not to speak of various social indicators — it's stupidity." But proposals to deprive the unions of co-responsibility for welfare programs leave most officials unsympathetic, even uncomprehending. During a recent roundtable discussion, a *profkom* head said she fully agreed with Livshits that the interests of man, not those of production, should top the list of trade union concerns, but added that, as always, "the better an enterprise works, the more possibilities there are to satisfy people's wants." "Enterprises' economic-accounting income, profits," she declared, "that's what I think about when I meet people and read in their eyes, 'childcare,' 'place in a dormitory,' 'apartment.'" Livshits replied that the *profkom* head sounded like "a producer, a planner — like a manager, but not a trade union leader."²⁶ Yet she had an obvious point. Co-responsibility, whether for administering social insurance, childcare, and other welfare programs, or for production, translates into access to scarce resources and to decision-makers that count. Even genuinely selfless and dedicated union leaders must wonder how surrendering such access could possibly advance the interests of the workers they represent.

Meanwhile, attention has been directed increasingly at even more fundamental questions, in particular the right to strike and trade union relations with the Party. Strikes obvious-

ly are a difficult issue for Soviet authorities, not least because of the longstanding presumption that socialism precludes "antagonistic" contradictions between workers and the state. Nevertheless, a debate about the legal regulation of strikes has evidently developed, although conducted almost entirely behind the scenes. One public manifestation was contained in the June 1 broadside in *Pravda*. The author proposed that the right of state health inspectors to shut down a shop or factory in case of imminent threat to environmental and/or worker health and safety be transferred to the enterprise *profkom* and, even more remarkably, that the unions be permitted to establish a special fund — in effect a strike fund — to compensate workers during any work stoppages that might result. In private, and specifically in the context of preparatory work on a new Law on the Rights of Trade Unions, debate has reportedly flourished.²⁷ Members of the drafting commission are said to have gone back and forth at length on the question, deciding in the end *not* to include any mention of strikes, reasoning that: i) nothing in current Soviet law forbids strikes (cf. the number of job actions now taking place); and ii) the principle legal theoreticians are hoping to institutionalize, that "everything be considered permissible which is not explicitly forbidden," should be observed in this case as well. Needless to say, this result leaves unresolved such crucial issues as the right to form strike funds, the right to picket and organize boycotts, and strike participants' access to welfare benefits. But perhaps this is not the end of the matter.

In contrast, the question of relations with the Party has been raised with considerable, even astonishing, frankness. Most comment so far has been aimed at the inadequacies of Party personnel policy, in which connection some of the shortcomings in trade union performance are now attributed to the poor quality of the cadres the Party has posted to the unions in recent years. As reported in *Pravda*, better than half of all current chairs, secretaries, and department heads of province *sovprofs* are former Party officials and, evidently, far from the most talented.²⁸ The head of the Orel *sovprof* recently characterized the Party's approach to trade union appointments as resting on the "remainder" principle.²⁹ The head of the Omsk *sovprof* reiterated the point in *Trud*, even mimicking the calculations of the [Party] officials responsible: "The young, energetic one — we'll send him to economic work, and the one who has to be dragged along only a couple more years until retirement — let him rest in a trade union chair.' And then we're surprised that our union committees have so few bold, energetic, unorthodox thinkers who in conditions of restructuring are needed like air."³⁰

Nor is this only, or even most importantly, a problem for the provinces. Vladimir Lomonosov, VTSPS deputy chairman since April 1986, before that served a very undistinguished term as chairman of the State Labor Committee, from

24 "Concerns of the Trade Unions," *op. cit.*, p. 12.

25 *Ibid.* Marat Baglay makes a similar, though less categorical argument in his article, "Restructuring and the Trade Unions," *Kommunist*, 1987, No. 12, pp. 80-90 (at 84).

26 "Concerns of the Trade Unions," *op. cit.*, p. 12.

27 The need for such a law has been debated for years. Supporters believe it will systematize and clarify existing legal and regulatory statutes and, as a result, strengthen the authority of the trade unions vis-à-vis other institutions, particularly all-union ministries and local government. In June 1988, a draft was said to be nearly ready for submission to the government for review, after which, supporters hope, it will be published and discussed openly.

28 Lyubitskiy, "Whose Interests," *op. cit.*

29 "Concerns of the Trade Unions," *op. cit.*, p. 18.

30 A. Bukhtiyarov, "A Position is Required," *Trud*, May 3, 1988, p. 2.

which post he was dismissed just a few months after Yuriy Andropov took power. Somehow Lomonosov managed to survive, even winning reelection to the Supreme Soviet in 1984, and then to the CPSU Central Committee in 1986, while working as an otherwise unidentified "responsible official" in the CPSU Secretariat. Valentin Makeyev, a VTsSPS secretary since January 1983, was at one time second secretary of the Moscow city party committee under Viktor Grishin. Appointed deputy prime minister in 1980, Makeyev was one of the first high-level officials dismissed by Andropov. Another current VTsSPS secretary, Igor' Klochkov, until December 1986 was a secretary of the Moscow province party committee. Another, Viktor Mishin, previously led the Komsomol. And still another, Karatay Turysov, although briefly head of the Kazakh republic *sovprof* and a member of the VTsSPS Presidium in the early 1980s, just prior to his election to the VTsSPS Secretariat in April 1986 was a secretary of the Kazakh Communist Party under the soon-to-be disgraced Dinmukhamed Kunayev. The problem of "remaindered" former Party officials seems also to exist in Moscow.

While some critics have rather limited goals — i.e., to get the Party to stop treating the unions as a dumping ground for tired or incompetent cadres — others are more ambitious. In June 1988, following a three-month struggle, the VTsSPS is reported to have overturned the local Party's nomination to the leadership of the province *sovprof* in Karaganda.³¹ A few weeks later, at the Party Conference, VTsSPS chairman Shalayev concluded his address with an attack on Party leadership of the unions that was striking in its sharpness and breadth. After applauding Gorbachev's rejection of "command-administrative" methods of governance, the union leader remarked that it was

no secret some Party organs have begun to understand the transmission mechanism from the Party to the masses as a rigid coupling of gears in a transmission box, in which it is impermissible to think about allowing trade union organizations any independence. Considered permissible are direct interference in internal union matters, including structural [questions] and the effort to "place in jobs" in union organs officials who sometimes have failed to prove themselves in prior positions.... Such a method of leadership not only does not add energy and a sense of principle to trade union organs but, on the contrary, makes them sluggish and lacking in initiative; instead of strengthening, it weakens the Party organ's link with the masses.

The fact that nearly all Party members are unionists and that four and a half million Party members serve in elected trade union positions is enough, Shalayev suggested, to ensure Party control.

Prospects for Reform

Although Gorbachev has said repeatedly that the role and significance of public organizations must be elevated, it is difficult to believe that such pressure, or even the recent emphasis on *demokratizatsiya*, are responsible for making the trade

unions the public issue they seem to have become. The General Secretary has seldom talked about the unions — less in the period after the trade union congress than before — and his remarks can hardly be said to have inspired the current debates about co-responsibility and trade union autonomy. What, then, is the explanation? Why has criticism of the unions intensified? And why have certain radical theoreticians and autonomy-seeking unionists decided that now is the time to press their respective arguments? The most likely answer, although one for which only indirect evidence exists, is the sharpening sense — among politicians and interested observers at all levels — that further institutional changes are required to contain the anxieties and discontents now spreading among the public, in the wake of heightened pressures to raise output and the lack of palpable gains in living standards that so far have marked radical economic reform.

Almost surely there is some connection. In his speech to the trade union congress, Gorbachev dwelled on two aspects of his economic reform package that, by all accounts, were not going very smoothly: wage reform and the switch to multiple-shift work in industry. In some cases, he lamented, factory unions were insufficiently supportive of change and reform was lagging. In others, union organs had allowed changes to be introduced hurriedly, making no effort to institute the necessary material and psychological conditions, with the result that reform was being discredited. In both respects, union passivity was perceived as threatening the larger enterprise.

This perception of the costs of trade union failure can only have intensified in the months since then. The implementation of economic reform has continued to lag, and there has been no real jump in economic performance. Living standards have changed little and, since mid-1987 especially, Party leaders have seemed increasingly alarmed at the lack of improvement. Less visibly but just as important, tensions have been growing on the shop floor. There have been numerous reports of the arbitrary lowering of workers' skill ratings as a means to wage reform — the pretext for the first *Pravda* article last spring — and of an increase in forced overtime, the so-called "black Saturdays." Strikes, mainly over wage issues and disproportionately concentrated among transport workers, also are increasing. Even the unions are feeling the pressure. At the trade union congress, authorities were said to be feeling "especially worried" by a rise in the number of collectively-signed complaint letters; nearly 8000 were received by the VTsSPS in 1986 alone.³² More recently, the head of the Omsk *sovprof* has written: "Laboring collectives are now paying for the passivity of the *profkoms*. Construction workers' earnings are falling, turnover is increasing, and all sorts of conflicts are arising on a daily basis."³³

Put differently, Soviet leaders are feeling the effects of a severe shortage of credible mass political institutions that has left them with surprisingly little capacity for mobilizing public support for reform at the grass-roots level, and few means short of coercion for absorbing and diffusing the social costs and popular protest that reform inevitably generates. In private

31 Interview.

32 *Trud*, February 25, 1987, p. 7.

33 Bukhtiyarov, "A Position," *op. cit.*

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discussions, well-placed Soviet observers tend to agree with this assessment. And many of the new institutions Gorbachev has promoted — from managerial elections and enterprise councils to groups for women and the elderly — clearly have been intended to fill some of the gap. But to build new institutions requires time, and in this case time will not wait. Thus, it is likely that politicians and others have begun to look increasingly to institutions already in place, in the hope that these might be reformed quickly enough to serve the needs of the present.

If true, the chances of significant trade union reform have risen sharply. To be sure, one cannot be certain what the outcome will be, particularly since the important part of the story has just begun. *No* reform is a possibility. At the same time, the unions' behavior to date suggests that a moderate, "bureaucratic" reform is more likely than a radical, "democratizing" one. The chances would seem to be fairly small that a movement for strong, independent trade unions willing to fight with the government over economic and social issues will emerge from within the official unions, led by the VTsSPS or by militant activists from below.

But the chances are not zero. For at precisely the time Party leaders are being driven by events to consider trade union reform, radical theoreticians are being provided an unprecedented opportunity to argue their case. Meanwhile, there are enthusiasts for radical change among local activists and mid-level officials. And many, like the Kemerovo leader quoted earlier, are learning that reform creates opportunities as well as dangers, and that the dangers may be less than alarmists have advertised. More important, the recent decision by top union leaders to demand openly more autonomy raises the possibility of a complicated strategic bargain. It is at least conceivable, if not yet likely, that the Party will cede to the unions greater autonomy, but as part of a larger package of changes that repudiate dualism, eliminate some of the more baneful forms of programmatic co-responsibility, and promote a concerted effort at internal democratization.

Whether this actually happens will depend on a variety of

factors, including Gorbachev's (or his successor's) political strategy, but also the policy problems of the moment, the choices and preferences of other institutions, the level of social mobilization, and the range of options and risks confronting Gorbachev and his fellow leaders that all these factors together create. This, in turn, leads to a more general comment on the prospects of democratization in the Soviet Union. As suggested at the start of this essay, we in the West have tended to look at this question too much "from the top down," as if everything depends on whether Gorbachev and other reformers want democratic reform and, if they do, whether they have the power to impose it. Both logic and much comparative experience tell us this is the wrong way to approach the question. There is no reason to think Gorbachev or any other Soviet leader will gratuitously redistribute power away from the Party and state to society, and this is the main reason why commentators have greeted Gorbachev's lofty rhetoric with so much skepticism. On the other hand, recent cases of "begun transitions" to democracy elsewhere in the world indicate that sometimes a ruling elite will initiate a process over which it then loses control. Incumbent leaders may institute partial political reforms from above, in pursuit of their own, self-serving purposes, which become the cause or pretext of actions by other institutions and groups in society — actions which, if they come to threaten the existing political order, are liable to force their rulers to choose between additional changes not originally contemplated, or a strategic, and possibly more dangerous retreat. The evidence reported here indicates that Gorbachev, too, is losing control over events — that, in practice, *demokratizatsiya* is no longer a program of limited political reform from above, but increasingly a process of negotiation between the General Secretary, other Party notables, and newly-mobilized institutional and social forces within the state and society. It is to the latter forces in particular that we should begin turning our attention, if we want to properly understand the prospects of *perestroika*.

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